Frequently Asked Questions about the
Contact Information Data Standard
September 6, 2002

The questions and answers are arranged in four categories:

- General
- Implementation of the Data Standard
- Use of the Data Standard
- Technical Questions for Implementers

General:

Q1:   What is the Contact Information Data Standard?
A: A "data standard" is a documented agreement among organizations that share or exchange data regarding formats, and definitions for such data. The Contact Information Data Standard provides a common vocabulary to be used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), States, and Tribes to identify a point-of-contact individual or organization, mailing or geographic address, and communication information. These three modules contain the basic information needed for contacting an individual or organization. The data standard is made up of a list of data elements, each of which is defined. Many of the data elements originate from the existing Facility Identification and Permitting data standards.

Q2:   Who developed the Contact Information Data Standard? Is this another federal mandate?
A: No, this is not another federal mandate. The decision to develop the Contact Information Data Standard, was made jointly by EPA, the States (through the Environmental Council of the States [ECOS], an organization that represents the heads of the state environmental agencies) and Tribes. All recognized that sharing and exchanging accurate data is important and will remain so. Together, they established the Environmental Data Standards Council (EDSC) to manage and guide the process.

Q3:   Why do we need to standardize contact information?
A: The Contact Information Data Standard helps define the answers to: who, where, and how in contacting a person or organization. There are many different environmental programs and many different government agencies involved in reporting environmental data. Often, these different programs or different agencies use different names and codes for the same contact information data element. If we are to share and compare data from different programs and different agencies, it is important that we identify data uniformly, regardless of what they are called or named by the source of the data. In other words, we need to make sure that "Red Delicious" apples are compared to "Red Delicious" apples even if some people may refer to them as just apples.

Implementation of the Data Standard:

Q4: **Will my State, Tribal, or EPA Program be required to use the Contact Information Data Standard?**

A: No State, Tribal, or agency (program) is required to adopt or use the Contact Information Data Standard, nor to incorporate it into that agency's or program's own data systems. However, once EPA, Tribes and state agencies adopt and begin implementing the data standard, it will likely become the specified "road map" for communications among environmental agencies exchanging environmental information.

Q5: **When is the Contact Information Data Standard supposed to be approved by the Tribes, States and EPA?**

A: The EDSC is expected to review and approve this standard after a 45-day comment period beginning in September 2002.

Q6: **Can some programs within a State, Tribe, or EPA program follow the Contact Information Data Standard, while others do not?**

A: Use of the Contact Information Data Standard is not required, although it will become the standard for sharing or exchanging data to or through the EPA national data systems, as well as between State and Tribal agencies. State, Tribal, or local government programs–especially those that do not exchange data with EPA, other Federal agencies or agencies in other States—are certainly not obliged to adopt or work within the Contact Information Data Standard. However, as it becomes a widely accepted standard, they may find it useful for data management and exchange.

Q7: **I am in a Tribal, State, or local government agency. My program doesn't use the same data elements as are used in the Contact Information Data Standard. Is there an expectation that we will change our data elements?**

A: No. The data standard uses terminology intended for data *exchange* and is applicable only after the data you send crosses the threshold of your organization. Data will need to map to existing data holdings and when exchanged or conform in definition, meaning, and format to the standard.

Q8: **My EPA program doesn't use the data elements that are used in the Contact Information Data Standard. Is there an expectation that we will change our own data elements?**

A: Although the data standard is intended for use in data exchange, it is expected that EPA programs will, as necessary (and over time), modify the data elements that they currently collect to conform with the data elements and terms in the Contact Information Data Standard where applicable. The schedule for these changes is normally three years, with possible waivers in consideration of modernization and update schedules.

Q9: **Is the Contact Information Data Standard the basis for a new data system design? Will we have to change our existing data system to conform to it?**

A: The answer for Federal, Tribal, State, and local government agencies is no. The Contact Information Data Standard is more like a dictionary to help translate or exchange data from any one data system to any other. Use of the Contact Information Data Standard does not require that any non-EPA agency or program change its current data system. When data is exchanged from one system to another, the Contact Information Data Standard will provide the necessary information to ensure that data from a given field in the sending system is mapped to the correct location in the receiving system. Local system designers may, once they choose to use this data standard for data exchange, elect to modify their system (perhaps in the context of a previously planned system modernization) in order to create the capability of exchanging data that conforms with the standard. As noted in the response above, EPA will be using the data standard as its own data systems are modified and updated.

Q10: **We are planning to update (one or more of) our current data system(s). How can the Contact Information Data Standard help us in this effort?**

A: The Contact Information Data Standard will provide clear and concise identification of Point of Contact Name or Organization, Mailing or Geographic Address, and communication information applicable data elements. Using the Environmental Data Registry (EDR), developers can download Contact Information data elements and attributes, allowable values (e.g., code sets), and other types of metadata to use in system design and documentation. Incorporating standardized data, such as data element definitions and specifications and sets of allowable values into systems is more efficient than developing and documenting new data elements. Use of the standard will also facilitate data integration and improve the reusability of data elements.

Q11: **Are there any federal funds available to help States, Tribes, or local government agencies that implement federal programs if they choose to update their systems to enable them to communicate more easily using the Contact Information Data Standard?**

A: Yes, although such funding is not linked directly to the Contact Information Data Standard development effort. EPA has and will continue to provide grant funding to assist other levels of government that implement federal environmental programs. Such assistance has often been used by grantees to help develop and update data management systems.

Q12: **What does this standard have to do with National Environmental Information Exchange Network I keep hearing about? Also, I thought everything was supposed to be in XML. Is this XML?**

A: The Network concept relies upon common Data Exchange Templates (DET) expressed in eXtensible Markup Language (XML), and exchanged based on common protocols. This data standard would be used as the starting point or "core" for contact information-related DETs. For example, several States have used a DET based on the State/EPA Facility Identification Standard to exchange facility data with EPA and other States, using Network protocols.

Use of the Data Standard:

Q13: **Who will use the Contact Information Data Standard?**
A: All Federal, Tribal, State, and local government agencies involved in environmental activities are encouraged to use the Contact Information Data Standard when and if they share or exchange data with other agencies. They are also encouraged to refer to the Contact Information Data Standard, and use it as a tool, if they are planning to update or enhance their own existing data systems. The public will be the ultimate user of the data standard, because it will provide the common vocabulary that will help such end users better understand the source of the data they are reviewing.

Q14: **Will EPA be issuing rules for use of the Contact Information Data Standard?**
A: No, at least not in the sense of issuing formal regulations. Information on the standard will be available through the EDSC Web site (http://www.epa.gov/edsc/) and the Environmental Data Registry (EDR) Web site (http://www.epa.gov/edr/).

Q15: **Will the Contact Information Data Standard be open for revision in the future? How will the standard be maintained?**
A: Yes. There is every reason to expect that adjustments or revisions will be necessary in the future. Once in use, we may discover limitations in the data standard that need to be corrected (e.g., additional levels of detail that should be provided, and others).

Technical Questions for Implementers:

Q16: **Do data elements in our application systems need to be the same data type as the standard data element? What if our data element field lengths are longer or shorter than the standard?**
A: This standard only specifies how information will be exchanged, not how systems should be designed. At times, differences between system parameters and data standard specifications may require some translation from a system that uses field lengths, etc. Field lengths in the standard are intended to accommodate the expected maximum length of the values across partner systems based on analysis conducted to date. If a system has a longer value for a given element and the organization wishes to exchange data using the standard, the value exported from the system would have to be adjusted (e.g., truncated or abbreviated). Field lengths in the standard can be increased, if partner needs require this, through the maintenance review of the standard.